

Making His Story Their Story: Teaching Hamilton at a Minority-serving Institution

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Abstract

In the summer of 2016, optimistic about a full-time teaching position at a minority-serving institution, yet unsure about what the U.S. election would mean for immigrants' rights, I played the Hamilton soundtrack daily.

Keywords

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In the summer of 2016, optimistic about a full-time teaching position at a minority-serving institution, yet unsure about what the U.S. election would mean for immigrants' rights, I played the *Hamilton* soundtrack daily. Lin Manuel Miranda wrote the Pulitzer-prize winning musical inspired by [Ron Chernow](#)'s biography on the United States' founding father because, he believed, Alexander Hamilton's life embodied hip hop. My repeated listenings urged me to assign the musical as homework in my courses.

Colleagues with whom I engage on Twitter provided resources with which to begin. A public historian, [Lyra Monteiro](#), wrote an important review for *Public History*, "[Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*](#)," which provide one key angle of critique. Latinx Theater scholar and *SO!* writer [Trevor Boffone](#) created an online syllabus, [#Syllabus4Ham](#), that provided important critiques of the musical, news coverage of its growing popularity, and initial scholarly analyses of the cultural historical significance of the musical's popularity. Pedagogically, Miranda's archival research in addition to his belief that Hamilton's life embodied hip hop sparked an interest to bring the production to my gender and interdisciplinary studies classrooms. While colleagues works' inspired ways to discuss the musical in class, post-election coverage and the release of the [Hamilton Mixtape](#) provided more material to discuss. Teaching children of hip hop whose lives embody the struggle that Miranda made the central force behind his re-writing of Hamilton's contribution to United States' history, I wanted to develop lessons drawing on those relations.

https://youtu.be/_sk8Ralp8w8

By the spring 2017, I had done preliminary reading on the syllabus Boffone provided and replaced the musical with the *Mixtape* as my car ride soundtrack. When organizing my syllabus, I assigned tracks from the mixtape against the musical's soundtrack with the intent of assigning students excerpts in both both my introductory Gender Studies course and Interdisciplinary Research Methods courses, but with a unique twist for each class. Gender Studies engaged with the content contextualized by discussions of immigration and citizenship. I assigned my Research Methods course Monteiro's critique of race-consciousness of the musical against the mixtape and the musical. While students were in solidarity with Monteiro's argument, I invited them to consider Miranda's original intent, the mixtape, which may have informed the themes Miranda prioritized.

Few of them had heard of the musical before my class and less had heard of the mixtape. Their limited exposure necessitated historicizing both Miranda's career and the evolution Hamilton's, which begins with 2009 Miranda's White House performance. Miranda, invited by President Obama to perform a song from his previous hit [In the Heights](#), instead decided to introduce his new project, a mixtape based on Alexander Hamilton.



<https://youtu.be/FVidWpNvmXA>

Through discussion, I proposed that the students consider that the production, in 2009 envisioned as an album, served as a strategic catalyst to bring attention to his forthcoming mixtape. That attention evolved into encouraging Miranda to produce the musical; it would take a few more years till the intended mixtape was produced. Even though produced later, I speculated that the mixtape thematically benefited from the popularity of the musical because the musical's focus on Alexander Hamilton rewrites the context of the mixtape.

Teaching *Hamilton* the musical and the mixtape felt politically necessary at a minority serving institution in this historical moment of anti-immigrant, and anti-black sentiment. Having, in the past, worked with other youth to mobilize youth empowerment through hip hop, *Hamilton* provided an avenue in which I could discuss its political potential *because* of its popularity not only in spite of it. In breaking down Miranda's cultural and political significance, I summarized the evolution of awards he and the musical's cast had won as well as the preliminary cast's reflections on participating in *Hamilton*, along with what it means to have the success of the musical produce a wider audience for the mixtape.

After more than a semester working with students who grow frustrated with the traditional research paper and because of my own work producing research-based fiction and poetry, teaching the musical and mixtape provided an important example of research-based art. Because some students approach interdisciplinary research methods not understanding the possibilities of the relationship between art and research and some students are unsure of how to connect learning outcomes to their aspiring performance careers, I find teaching Miranda's work remains necessary. Further, Miranda provides an avenue through which I could relate to students because of our shared interest in music as well as our conflicted relationship with consuming hip hop.

Teaching a student population that is 25% Latinx and who are either directly or indirectly affected by immigration policies, my students related, often quite deeply and intimately, to the message of the song. I watched their faces as they listened, particularly to "Immigrants (We Get

the Job Done),” and their kinesthetic responses showcased what many of us ache for our students to experience: wonder, appreciation, and the illumination of insight.



https://youtu.be/6_35a7sn6ds

I then guided them to hone in specifically on Puerto Rican rapper Residente rapping about the Mexican immigrant struggle in Spanish, emphasizing how he sonically and rhetorically urges a Latin pan-ethnicity while using his U.S. citizenship privilege to historicize border crossing Mexicans. Residente’s lyrics create an opportunity to discuss Puerto Ricans’ cultural reality of being perceived as immigrants while being legally defined as citizens, all the while calling back to the lyrical connection to the “Battle of Yorktown” from the musical.

https://youtu.be/D_be1a9iD58

I highlighted Miranda’s rhetorical strategy in building a song around one line that contexts changes across either song. The “Battle of Yorktown” centers on the contributions of immigrants to gaining freedom. During the lecture, I drew connections between the lyric that would become a song and the lyric subtly referencing the lack of freedoms for black people who were enslaved in the U.S. I asked about the parallels before explaining them, using the intentionality behind creating and compelling a racially diverse cast to script a narrative about who could and who had built the United States. What does it mean to hear *these* voices emanating from *this* cast, telling *this* story?

Pedagogically, teaching music in either course served the intent of reimagining the purpose and potential of sound, whether from a musical or a mixtape, as a site of critical thinking. Popular musicians’ cultural authority slowly decenters the white fragility I have come to expect from difficult conversations such as the ones *Hamilton* and *The Hamilton Mixtape* allow me to have. Furthermore, the call-and-response between the mixtape and the musical work address the silence of the unrecognized, exploited, and/or enslaved labor that continues to build this country. For my students, hearing musicians they like or who perform in their favorite genre,

speaking truth to power about poverty, struggle, and not being thought of as good enough shifted not only our classroom energy, but many students' perspectives.

Teaching the *Hamiltons* helped my student population make sense of their “invisible” status in the U.S. and want more than what’s expected. They gained something in being able to hear their stories in the classroom—not just read them on the page—but *hear* them from people who look and sound like them. **Hungry for more material that speaks to their disenfranchisement, my students wondered why more songs that sound the complex beauty of our resilience and struggle are not on the radio. They wanted to know how they can ask for more.**

Featured Image: Screen capture from “Immigrants (We Get the Job Done)” remix video

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